BACKGROUND

Land and Climate. Covering 49,998 square miles (129,494 square kilometers), Nicaragua is about the size of Iowa. Although it is the largest country in Central America, only about 20 percent of the land is suitable for cultivation. Lago de Nicaragua is near the Pacific Ocean and is the only freshwater lake in the world known to have sharks, but many people believe the sharks are now extinct. Low central mountains and hills separate the populated west from the east.

Forests cover about one-third of the country. Large pine forests are located in the northwest and mountain areas, while tropical rain forests and coastal wetlands spread across the east. Natural resources include gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, and timber. Nicaragua’s climate is tropical, although the highlands are cooler. Humidity is generally high and temperatures average 80°F (27°C). The dry season starts around November and ends around May. Several volcanoes along the Pacific coast are active; tremors and earthquakes are common. Nicaragua occasionally experiences destructive hurricanes and tidal waves.

History. In 1502, Columbus became the first European to visit Nicaragua. It was later settled by Spanish explorers—known as conquistadores—who battled and conquered the indigenous people. Spanish settlements date from the 1520s. Indigenous groups resisted the Spanish until finally being conquered in 1552. Britain established settlements along the Mosquito Coast (Costa de Mosquitos) in the 17th century and claimed sovereignty over the coast in 1740. However, Nicaragua essentially was ruled by Spain until it declared independence in 1821. With independence, it became a member of the United Provinces of Central America but chose to be an independent republic in 1838. Political power in the country alternated between liberals and conservatives over the next few decades. The competition sometimes led to violence.

When internal chaos threatened U.S. economic interests in 1909, the U.S. military intervened. During the 1920s and 1930s, guerrillas led by Augusto Cesar Sandino fought the U.S. occupation. A rival general, Anastasio Somoza García, gave orders for Sandino to be assassinated in 1934. In 1936, Somoza seized the presidency. He ruled as a dictator until his assassination in 1956. The Somoza family continued to rule the country, beginning with Somoza’s son Luis Somoza Debayle, who died in 1967. He was succeeded by his brother, General Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

In 1962, the Sandinistas revolutionary group (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) was formed with the goal of overthrowing the Somozas. For the next 15 years, Sandinistas carried out various unsuccessful terrorist attacks on General Somoza’s National Guard, which was armed by the United States. In 1972, a massive earthquake destroyed Nicaragua’s capital city, Managua. During the disaster General Somoza stole relief supplies, which resulted in greater support for the Sandinistas.

Riots broke out in 1978 after a prominent anti-Somoza newspaper editor named Pedro Joaquín Chamorro was assassinated. Sandinistas stormed the national palace in Managua, and civil war followed. General Somoza was forced to flee the country in July 1979, when the Sandinistas took control. Fifty thousand people were killed in the civil war.

The new Marxist-oriented government seized the Somoza fortune, redistributed their lands to the peasants, suspended the constitution, and began tightening controls. Concerned that Sandinistas were aiding Marxist rebels in El Salvador, the U.S.
government suspended economic aid to Nicaragua in 1981, beginning a decade of strained relations between the two nations. Throughout the 1980s, U.S. funds supported a guerrilla group known as the Contras, who were opposed to Sandinista rule. General elections officially brought Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega Saavedra to power in 1985. The United States responded by imposing a trade embargo that severely handicapped the country's economy.

Eventually, the Sandinista government agreed to ensure free elections if the Contras would disarm. In 1990, Ortega was defeated by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, widow of the assassinated newspaper editor. The United States supported Chamorro’s presidency, ended trade restrictions, and pledged aid to rebuild the economy. The Contras began to disband in 1990. Although sporadic violence erupted throughout the early 1990s, widespread fighting did not resume. Striving for national reconciliation and economic recovery, Chamorro’s government made some progress: it lowered inflation, depoliticized the army and national police force, and initiated reparations for lands seized in the 1980s. However, Chamorro was unable to solve Nicaragua’s severe economic problems.

The 1996 elections brought Arnoldo Aleman to power and marked the first time in a century that a democratically elected civilian president transferred power to another. Aleman suffered a crushing defeat to Enrique Bolaños in the next election (2002), however, and was later convicted of money laundering, corruption, and embezzlement, for which he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. November 2006 elections brought former president Daniel Ortega back to power; despite his Marxist past, Ortega has said he has no plans for major economic reform.

The People

Population. Nicaragua’s population of 5.6 million is growing at 2 percent annually. The majority (69 percent) is mestizo, or of mixed Spanish and Indian heritage. Approximately 17 percent of the population is of European descent, about 9 percent is black, and 5 percent is purely indigenous. Most people live on the western plains. The population of Managua, the capital, is more than one million. The Caribbean side is sparsely populated—mostly by smaller ethnic groups. Nicaragua’s population is young; nearly 40 percent is younger than age 14.

Language. Spanish is the official and predominant language. Along the Caribbean coast, small groups speak English or other ethnic languages. Creole and Garífuna are common languages among the black population, as are English and Spanish, while some indigenous groups speak Miskito, Sumo, or Rama. Some residents of Managua and other large cities speak English.

Religion. Approximately 85 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Protestant, Evangelical, and other Christian organizations are also present. Although relations between the Catholic Church and the government were strained in the Sandinista period, the church has maintained a strong influence. Weekly attendance of mass is the norm. Catholic traditions, such as baptisms, communions, and weddings, remain a significant part of family life. Some older women attend mass daily. Religious icons, particularly pictures of the Virgin Mary, decorate many homes and vehicles. When making future plans, people often add *Si Dios quiere* (God willing) as a qualifier to their commitment. Freedom of religion is guaranteed.

General Attitudes. Nicaraguans enjoy being sociable. They value honesty, friendliness, respect, and good humor. They are kind, thoughtful, and willing to give to those in need, even if they themselves have little. Individuals are more important than schedules, so punctuality may be admired but not strictly observed. Nicaraguans defend honor vigorously, sometimes even physically. Those in power are esteemed for their opinions and generally are afforded wealth. Therefore, power is highly valued and often sought. Social status is measured by material possessions, land ownership, family name, and connections. Personal criticism is taken seriously and so is usually avoided. Getting a job, having a large family, and owning a home or plot of land are important long-term goals for Nicaraguans.

Politics is a favorite subject. The Sandinista influence still pervades civilian life. Collectivism and helping others are common values in all social classes. Years of strife have caused many to become wary and distrustful. Some now look at the government as a source of problems.

Personal Appearance. Neatness and cleanliness in physical appearance are important to Nicaraguans. Even if they cannot afford expensive clothing, they will make special efforts to be neat and well groomed. All clothing is bleached and ironed.

People throughout the country wear lightweight clothing. In rural areas, men wear cotton shirts (button-down and T-shirts) and khaki pants. Jeans are also common. Rural women usually wear light cotton dresses or skirts and blouses. When working on daily agricultural tasks, both men and women wear *chinelas* (flip-flops), reserving regular shoes for trips to town or special occasions. Farmers might wear boots, sombreros, and old army fatigues.

Urban men wear cotton slacks and shirts (often long-sleeved). Urban women wear light cotton dresses, although many also wear pants. Men often wear a *guayabera* (an embroidered dress shirt) as semiformal wear instead of a tie and suit jacket. Suit coats are not worn during the hottest months of the year.

Customs and Courtesies

Greetings. When meeting another person for the first time, Nicaraguans smile, shake hands, and say either *Mucho gusto de conocerle* (Glad to meet you) or ¿Cómo está usted? (How are you?). Inquiring about the health of family members demonstrates friendliness between acquaintances. Complete attention is given to the person being greeted. Common terms for greeting include *Buenos días* (Good morning), *Buenas tardes* (Good afternoon), and *Buenas noches* (Good evening). A casual greeting, especially among the youth, is *Hola* (Hi) or ¿Cómo le va? (How’s it going?).

Men greet each other with a hearty handshake, and close friends hug and pat each other on the back. Men and women usually greet female friends with a kiss on the cheek and a gentle hug; rural women pat each other on the upper arm rather than hug.

Those of higher social standing are greeted with titles such as Señor, Señora, or Señorita (“Mr.,” “Mrs.,” or “Miss”) to show respect. One uses the titles Don and Doña with first names to indicate special respect, familiarity, or affection. Professional titles are also used before surnames.

Gestures. Nicaraguans use many gestures when speaking. To beckon, one waves all fingers with the palm facing down. One points by extending the chin or puckering the lips in the intended direction. If a person wants to pay for something, he or she may rub one index finger repeatedly down the other, similar to the U.S. gesture indicating shame. Many people
snap the forefinger against the middle finger to emphasize that something is very rich, expensive, or difficult to accomplish.

Avoiding eye contact during conversation generally is not acceptable; however, some women may do so in deference to others. Offering a seat to pregnant women, the elderly, or women with children is common. Women may also offer to hold other people’s children on their lap if the parents are standing. Upon entering a building, men remove their hats or caps. Raising one’s voice or displaying affection in public generally is not acceptable.

**Visiting.** Nicaraguans are hospitable and enjoy visiting. In rural areas, people commonly (even daily) visit family and friends unannounced. Those in urban areas with access to telephones usually plan visits in advance. Relatives and friends who live in other areas often visit for weekends and holidays.

Because of the hot climate, hosts always offer their guests a cool drink. Water, juice, or natural beverages such as the corn-based *pinol* are most popular. Refusing a drink is considered a serious discourtesy. When one enters a home, it is important to greet everyone and wait for an invitation to sit. When visiting for a special purpose, guests first inquire about the health of the family before they discuss other matters. Good-byes may be drawn out and full of well-wishing. Visitors who arrive during mealtime are invited to join their hosts.

Guests tend to express admiration for their hosts rather than for material objects in the home. Dinner guests may take small presents on special occasions, such as anniversaries, birthdays, and Catholic ceremonies.

**Eating.** Breakfast usually is eaten at 6 or 7 a.m., although people in rural areas may eat earlier during busy agricultural seasons. Lunch, the main meal of the day, is eaten at midday and often is followed by a *siesta* (afternoon rest). In rural areas, the *siesta* is taken from noon to 2 p.m., the hottest time of day, when work is difficult. Most people in urban areas take only an hour break to eat lunch sometime between noon and 2 p.m. Dinner is usually between 7 and 9 p.m.

Rural families eat lunch together, but work and school schedules keep many urban families from doing the same. Most families make special efforts to eat together on weekends and holidays. In rural areas, people eat with a spoon or scoop their food with a tortilla. Sometimes the spoons are made from sections of a dried gourd shell. In urban areas, people may eat with a tortilla or spoon, but they also use knives and forks. Many fried foods are eaten with the hands. People keep both hands (not elbows) on or above the table. Hosts expect their guests to eat what is served. They may offer second helpings. Diners are expected to praise the quality of the meal.

**LIFESTYLE**

**Family.** The extended family is the basis of society and strongly influences an individual’s life and decisions. Parents, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins commonly live together. The oldest male is the head of the family. Nearly all Nicaraguans aspire to have large families; both men and women gain social status by being a parent.

During the Sandinista period, women were given a greater role in society and the right to participate more actively in family matters. Military service was common for women under the Sandinista regime, and many became involved in civic affairs. About one-third of the labor force is female. Because a number of men died or were sent away during the civil war, many women became heads of families. While men are still seen as the authorities and women generally defer to them, women control most household affairs.

Nicaraguans have two family names. The name that comes last is the mother’s family name, while the second-to-last name is the father’s family name, which functions as a person’s surname. Therefore, a person named José Muñoz Gómez would be called Señor Muñoz.

**Housing.** The typical modern Nicaraguan home has one or two storeys and is made mostly of concrete. It has concrete walls, or sometimes brick walls covered in concrete, and concrete floors. The roof is made of zinc, supported by wooden rafters or steal beams. Floors are covered in ceramic tiles. Almost every window and door is protected by security bars. These building traits are shared by the vast majority of Nicaraguan homes, irrespective of their location or the economic standing of the owner.

Of course, there is considerable variation in Nicaraguan housing, too. The historic homes, as well as a few new dwellings in poor areas, tend to be made of adobe. Along the Caribbean Coast, houses are often made of wood and then raised on stilts to protect against flooding. Not all homes are equipped with running water. If they are, then toilet and shower facilities are often installed in a small structure near the main house. Latrines remain common in both rural and urban areas. When large families live in a relatively small home, it is very common for two or more people to sleep in a small bedroom. Almost all families own a rocking chair and other pieces of locally made furniture. The redistribution of land and homes seized by the Sandinista government remains a sensitive issue.

**Dating and Marriage.** Group dating is common among young people. Activities may include dancing or day-trips to the beach. In many families, courtship still takes place in the parlor of the girl’s home, under the watchful eye of her family.

Civil marriages are the most common, although those who can afford it also have a large church wedding. Most marry between the ages of 16 and 23. In small towns, the bride and groom walk a full circle around the town directly after their ceremony. *Machismo*, the male attitude of proving one’s manliness or superiority, continues to be a strong cultural influence. Excessive drinking and infidelity among men are widely tolerated.

**Life Cycle.** In Nicaragua, the birth of a child is celebrated with a baby shower. In line with Catholic traditions, parents generally baptize their children as infants. When a Nicaraguan girl turns 15, she has a special birthday, the *quinceañeros*. The celebration serves as a kind of coming-out party, in which she leaves her childhood behind and emerges as a young adult. Guests eat, drink, and break a piñata. Death is a time for mourning and remembrance. In smaller cities, a hired car with a loud speaker drives through the streets announcing the name of the deceased and informing people when and where the funeral will be held. A *vela* (vigil) in the family home may last several days. During this time, mourners come to see the body, reflect on the passing, and eat with the grieving family. The funeral service itself is held in the church. It is followed by a procession to the cemetery where the deceased is buried.

**Diet.** For most Nicaraguans, a typical meal includes beans and rice; obtaining a well-balanced meal is difficult for many people who cannot afford more. Among wealthier families, the main meal of the day generally consists of rice, beans, some kind of meat, and a salad or vegetable. The meal is served with tortillas and fruit juice. Corn is an important ingredient in many foods. Oil is used frequently in cooking. *Gallo pinto* (a
dish of rice and beans fried together) is eaten in many households for breakfast and dinner. Other typical dishes include tortillas, enchiladas, nacatamales (meat, vegetables, and corn meal cooked in a banana leaf), mondongo (tripe and beef knuckles), vigórón (vegetables with pork skins), and baho (meat, vegetables, and plantains). Tropical fruits generally are plentiful. Fried plantains (plátanos) are popular. Locally made cheeses also are very popular.

**Recreation.** Baseball is the national sport. Soccer, boxing, softball, basketball, and volleyball are also popular. Children and teens often socialize in the park until about 9 p.m. Dances are held on Friday and Saturday nights in local schools or on basketball courts. Nicaraguans of all ages love to dance, so most parties or large events include dancing. Going to the beach and participating in club activities are also common.

**The Arts.** Handicrafts such as ceramics, hammocks, wall hangings, hats woven of straw, embroidered blouses, and wood carvings are common. Rubén Darío made poetry a national pastime. A literary movement called La Vanguardia (the Vanguard) seeks to restore Nicaragua’s cultural identity.

The national instrument is the marimba (which is similar to a xylophone) and is usually accompanied by guitars, maracas, and traditional flutes (zuls). Folk music is prevalent at festivals. African culture influences music on the Caribbean coast.

**Holidays.** Public holidays include New Year’s Day, Easter (Thursday–Sunday), Labor Day (1 May), Battle of San Jacinto (14 Sept.), Independence Day (15 Sept.), and Christmas. In addition to Christmas, Gritería Day (7 Dec.) and Feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 Dec.) both celebrate Christ’s conception. Workers also receive a half-day vacation on Christmas Eve. Numerous holidays honoring local patron saints are the main annual events in towns and regions; celebrations may last from one day to two weeks. Because Catholics do not eat red meat during Lent, Nicaraguans traditionally eat iguanas as a paste or in garrobo soup before and during Easter.

**SOCIETY**

**Government.** The Republic of Nicaragua consists of fifteen departamentos (provinces) and two autonomous regions located on the Atlantic coast. The executive branch is composed of the president, currently Daniel Ortega, the vice president, and the cabinet. Constitutional reforms in 1995 transferred many powers previously held by the executive branch to the legislative branch. The National Assembly has 92 members. Legislators are elected to serve five-year terms. While more than 20 political parties are active in Nicaragua, many are joined in coalitions. Some of the largest political parties include the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), and the Conservative Party (PC). The voting age is 16.

**Economy.** Devastated by a decade of central planning under the Sandinistas, a civil war, the U.S. trade embargo, and natural disasters (including extensive damage from Hurricane Mitch in 1998), the economy remains the country’s greatest challenge. Economic stabilization plans have dropped inflation from more than 750 percent (1991) to about 5 percent; even so, expectations for change have greatly exceeded the government’s ability to provide it. More than half of the population is affected by unemployment and under-employment.

A significant portion of Nicaragua’s enormous foreign debt was forgiven in 2004 and 2005, though some debt relief is dependent on political and economic reform. The economy relies on agricultural exports, and about 40 percent of the labor force is employed in agriculture.

Nicaragua has the potential for a much stronger economy. However, damage to the country’s infrastructure has set development back decades. Controversy surrounds property rights; settlement of land disputes is needed to increase foreign investment. More than half of the population lives in poverty. Despite the myriad of challenges, the economy is growing at a modest pace. The currency is the gold córdoba (NIO).

**Transportation and Communications.** Years of fighting, the poor economy, and natural disasters have damaged the transportation and communications systems. Outside of major cities, many roads are unpaved or are in disrepair. Many rural areas can be reached only by four-wheel drive trucks or by horseback. Buses provide service in cities and are generally affordable and efficient. Postal, telegraph, and telephone services are limited in rural areas. About 25 percent of the population has a phone, but cellular phone popularity is growing.

**Education.** Schooling is mandatory between the ages of six and thirteen. Most children begin primary school, but only about one-third complete it. Students have to pay for their own supplies, uniforms, tuition, and expenses, which often is too difficult for the poor. Those who complete primary training generally proceed to the secondary level. Nicaragua has five private and five state universities.

**Health.** Health care is limited, particularly outside of Managua. Community volunteers have become active in promoting prevention and early detection of diseases. However, many people, particularly those in rural areas, do not get adequate care. Patients who need to go to a hospital must provide their own dressings and medications; many cannot. Low wages have led to occasional strikes by medical professionals working in the public health system. Still, more than three-fourths of all infants are immunized and about the same number of women receive some prenatal care. Access to safe water and sanitation is a problem in rural areas.

**AT A GLANCE**

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